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LETTING GO AND MOVING ON

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FOURTH
PRESBY
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A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture: Matthew 4:12-17

"He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea. . . ."
Matthew 4:13 (NRSV)

Life ordinarily does not require anything quite that dramatic of us. In fact, most of our decisions on most days are guided by prudence and caution. Once a month or so a friend and I meet for breakfast. The restaurant where we meet offers a special. It is called, I think, "The Heartland" and consists of a small mountain of corned beef hash garnished with a fried egg, with home fried potatoes on the side. It is a work of art. I think of it as a kind of defiant celebration of cholesterol. My friend and I, about the same age, always look at it wistfully perhaps even lustfully, and then order grapefruit juice, cold cereal and skim milk. When we met around Christmas time it seemed a festive occasion, so we decided to live it up and not order the usual. I thought about the Heartland, so did he. I ordered a poached egg on dry toast. He ordered the same.

So I was delighted to see a cartoon in a recent *New Yorker.* A businessman in suit and tie is standing in the kitchen at breakfast time. He says to his wife: "I feel like pushing the envelope this morning, honey, starting with a little grape jelly for that bran muffin."

In point of fact, there are not many radically dramatic moments in life. Rather — for most of us, most of the time — life is a sequence of prudent, cautious, reasoned decisions. Nothing like that sequence of events described in Matthew four ever happens to us and, frankly, we're comfortable with that.

In an essay on the story of the call of the disciples and their obedient response, Episcopal priest, Suzanne Guthrie, writes about her life and work in a way that sounded familiar to me:

> "The urgency in most of it is directed simply toward the maintenance of daily life. The immediacy of the call of the divine is less obvious. My work as a parish priest does not at all evoke the adventure of the call of the disciples, who immediately left their nets to follow Jesus into the unknown."

As is the case with many of us, I suspect, the Reverend Ms. Guthrie wonders about it, and confesses:

> "Perhaps I too will be called to be heroic someday, to drop immediately what I am doing to live a more radical life in Christ. In the meantime, I must rush around within these small circles of modest discipleship with what I hope is faithfulness." [*Christian Century* 12/23 - 30/92]

Most of us can identify with that — lives of modest discipleship: grape jelly with the bran muffin.

The story the New Testament tells, however, begins very differently. An unknown carpenter from Nazareth is walking along the shores of the Sea of Galilee. He sees two fishermen casting their net. "Follow me," he says, and they drop the net and follow. They walk some more and come upon two men in a boat with their father, repairing their net. "Follow me," he says, and they step out of the boat and walk away from their father and follow him.

It is a brilliant picture: we have the details in mind. And it is enhanced, as all good stories are, by what it doesn't say as well as what it tells us. It doesn't say a word about who those four fishermen were, whether they had known how before, whether they hated fishing for a living and were ready for an alternative, whether Zebedee was an overbearing, possessive, controlling father from whose authoritarian presence his sons, James and John, were eager to escape at the first opportunity. None of that — just the elegant simplicity of Jesus' call and their immediate response: their letting go and moving on.

There is always something new to discover and this time it was the connection between a familiar account and the vignette which precedes it — the very first words about Jesus' public ministry. "He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea."

For him the story begins with letting go and moving on. It must have been a major decision and a very major step for him. He was thirty years old. He had lived in Nazareth all his life...running the shop, taking care of his mother, we assume. And so "making his home in Capernaum" is no minor detail. It means letting go of his mother, in a sense, his home, and routine, and friends. It means letting go of his entire security system and moving on. . . in the same way that Peter and Andrew, James and John will do.

In fact, sometimes it seems that faith in the Bible is just that — letting go and moving on. The saga begins in Paradise. Eden provides everything human beings need in beautiful abundance; everything, that is, except choices, freedom. And so the story doesn't really start until human beings have let go of Paradise and moved on, east of Eden, where they work and play and live and die and decide whether or not to be faithful.

Abraham and Sarah had to pack up their tents and belongings and move toward the promised land; in the process letting go of everything they had built and established and accumulated and saved.

And the Exodus — the wonderful story of the children of Israel escaping from Egypt. "Let my people go," Moses said. But the real story is that the people don't want to let Pharaoh go. As soon as they make their escape and find themselves terribly free, but in the wilderness, they start to complain: "Egypt wasn't so bad. At least there was a roof over our heads and food on the tables. Maybe we ought to go back."

Sometimes it seems that what faith is about in the Bible is letting go of old securities and moving on. Sometimes it seems that what the Bible is most against is investing in the wrong place for security.

We'll come back to that. Think for a moment now about how true the dynamic is generally.

Intellectual growth requires letting go of old truth and moving on to the new, not an easy process, by the way. The Church, the university, everyone in medieval society, was certain that the sun revolved around the earth, and until people let go of that notion and moved on, modern science was not possible.

Letting go and moving on is the most important lesson of parenting. What is the most important thing your parents taught you? There is only one answer to that question. The most important lesson parents teach their children is how to be a person without them, how to stand alone. That is what parenting is all about and if for some reason it ends up teaching the opposite, namely that we are never adequate, never autonomous without them, it creates some rather long-term problems.

It is not easy - letting go, particularly of people in love. It seems at first that you ought to hold tightly to someone you love - not let go. But the truth is that, in love, you can hold too tightly until there is no breath, no life left.

It is an art, I think, knowing when and how to hold tightly and let go.

It is a part of what Norman MacLean's wonderful story, *A River Runs Through It,* is about.

A beautifully alive younger brother lives constantly on the edge. . . and constantly in marked contrast to the staid life style of his Presbyterian parents.

When the son dies tragically, inevitably the author, MacLean himself, an older brother, must bring the terrible news to his parents.

> "My mother turned and went to her bedroom where, in a house full of men and rods and rifles, she had faced most of her great problems alone. She was never to ask me a question about the man she loved most and understood the least. Perhaps she knew enough to know that for her it was enough to have loved him. He was probably the only man in the world who had held her in his arms and leaned back and laughed." [p. 111]

I was struck with how relevantly the theme plays out on a societal level and how critical it is for the health of the nation to let go and move on. The culture had to let go of the stereotypes which are an important component of racism in order to move on to some semblance of equal justice, equal opportunity for all. It was not easy. It still is not easy for many.

The importance of the *Malcolm X* story is his consistent insistence that African Americans must let go of the images and behaviors and self-perceptions imposed by a racist culture in order to move on. At the same time, white people must let go of the images and perceptions and stereotypes which are comfortable and which provide racial superiority and security.

What a moment it was when Maya Angelou at the Inauguration of the President read her poem and said that —

> "Each of you, descendant of some passed
> On traveller, has been paid for. . . .
>
> Lift up your faces, you have a piercing need
> For this bright morning dawning for you.
> History, despite its wrenching pain,
> Cannot be unlived, and if faced
> With courage, need not be lived again.
>
> Lift up your eyes upon
> This day breaking for you.
> Give birth again
> To the dream.
>
> Women, children, men,
> Take it into the palms of your hands. . . .
> Each new hour holds new chances
> For new beginnings.
> Do not be wedded forever
> To fear, yoked eternally
> To brutishness.
>
> The horizon leans forward, ..."

The Bible assumes something about us which is borne out in experience and documented by social science. It is that we yearn for security: and that we are willing to invest a lot on the pursuit of security. The Bible assumes that our pursuit of security is driven by fear and anxiety, and that in pursuit we make bad choices, invest in the wrong places, cling to the wrong images and symbols. The theological word for it is idolatry — which is merely looking in the wrong place, giving yourself in the wrong way, for your ultimate security.

William Sloane Coffin writes:

> "It is inevitable: before the awesome terrors of the world every human heart quakes. Every human being tries desperately to secure himself against his insecurity - by gaining more power, more money, more virtue, more health. But the effort is naive: our need for security always outstrips our ability to provide it."
> [*The Courage to Love,* p. 11]

Jesus first let go and moved on to Capernaum. And then he asked men and women to do the same. The story casts it in dramatically immediate terms. But, may I suggest, that the divine call to let go and move on may come to you and me, in reality, a lot less dramatically, and a lot more mixed in with everydayness of life.

Jesus summoned men and women to let go of the way they had been thinking about God, about morality, about life, about other people. He called men and women to let go of a comfortable system that assured them that if they obeyed all rules and avoided immorality they would be righteous, holy, accepted and loved by God. Jesus insisted that his followers let go and move on; to see their religion not as a way to guarantee their ultimate security, to trust God for that, and to use religion as a way to celebrate, to rejoice and be glad at the good news of God's love; to see other people not as a threat to morality or purity, but as brothers and sisters, regardless of their race, or the condition of their health, or life style, or their choice of friends; to be loved and respected and included in the community; to aspire in personal spirituality not to personal purity but simply to love others – neighbors, people in need – with profound and deep passion.

My sense is that the call of Christ still comes to us to let go and move on.

What could it be for you? Is it the racism you learned as a child and which was one of the organizing principles of the world in which you were formed and came of age; a genteel racism of stereotypes and patronizing charity; of all white fraternities and clubs and neighborhoods and schools which assured us that injustice, unfairness, prejudice, exclusion were all right because we really are superior? Let it go — and move on.

Or is it an area of public life with which our whole culture is struggling — from the Joint Chiefs of Staff to the Permanent Judicial Commission of the Presbyterian Church; an attitude we have come to know as homophobia — the fear of homosexuality — which as an organizing principal of life, supports stereotypes and discrimination and, in a general manner is willing to accept cruelty and violence and exclusion?

Or is it more personally, anger — which defines you and more than you admit, shapes your behavior: anger at your parents, your child, your spouse? Or is it resentment over a slight, an insult that happened long ago and which remains like a malignancy of the spirit?

Let it go and move one.

Or is it fear? The Bible thinks that is true for all of us. The Bible assumes that anxiety is at the heart of the human dilemma; that we pursue security because we are afraid of life and death. That beautiful Psalm we read together, more than 2,500 years old, almost invites you to list, to catalog, to name your fears: "Evil doers, adversaries, enemies" — and then to let them go.

"The Lord is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid?"

The promise is that in letting go of whatever we use to gain our security, we move to a new place where real security becomes a possibility. That's the secret of the Gospel.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in the process of letting go of all the comfortable security of his middle class bourgeois life in pre- war Germany, in order to cast his lot with the underground Church and ultimately the resistance, wrote:

> "The disciple is dragged out of his relative security into a life of absolute insecurity: that is, in truth, into the absolute security and safety of the fellowship of Jesus."
> [*The Cost of Discipleship*, p. 40]

The story is about men and women who walked away from everything - and found life. The call remains, the summons to let go — to move on, to get up from where we are, to follow; to trust Jesus Christ with our future, with the meaning and significance of our lives; to trust him with our death and in the trusting, the following, to discover the strength, the safety, the security of the everlasting arms.

Amen.